

*Poems of a Jew*





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THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN COLLECTION

**POEMS OF A JEW**

by Karl Shapiro    **PERSON, PLACE AND THING**  
                      **V-LETTER AND OTHER POEMS**  
                      **ESSAY ON RIME**  
                      **TRIAL OF A POET**  
                      **POEMS 1940-1953**  
                      **POEMS OF A JEW**

By KARL SHAPIRO

# Poems of a Jew



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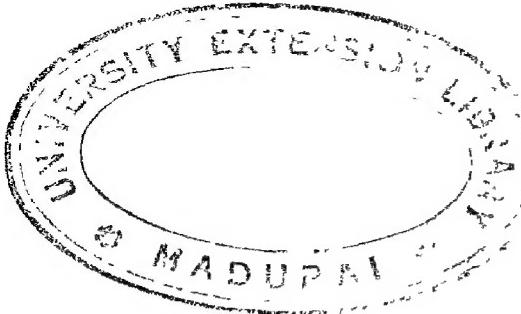
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Of the poems in this collection, the following appeared originally in *The New Yorker*: "Israel," "The Phenomenon," "Christmas Eve: Australia," "V-Letter," "The Southerner," "The Progress of Faust," "The Convert." Others have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Partisan Review*, *Botteghe Oscure*, *What's New*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Poetry London-New York*.

**Manufactured in the United States of America**

To My Parents





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The free modern Jew, celebrated so perfectly in the character of Leopold Bloom, is neither hero nor victim. He is man left over, after everything that can happen has happened.

As a third-generation American I grew up with the obsessive idea of personal liberty which engrosses all Americans except the oldest and richest families. As a Jew I grew up in an atmosphere of mysterious pride and sensitivity, an atmosphere in which even the greatest achievement was touched by a sense of the comic. Isolated within my own world, like a worm in an apple, I became a poet.

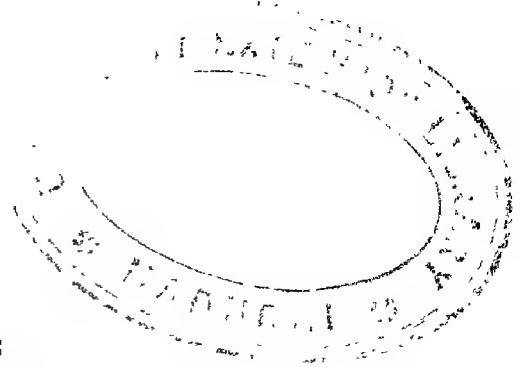
The poems here were written over a long period of time and are extracted mostly from volumes which have nothing to do with the present theme. But the undercurrent of most of my poems is the theme of the Jew, and for this reason I collect these examples now as a separate presentation.

*branding instead of beauty*

**DEAD SEA SCROLLS**

# PART 1.

## *The Alphabet*



The letters of the Jews as strict as flames  
Or little terrible flowers lean  
Stubbornly upwards through the perfect ages,  
Singing through solid stone the sacred names.  
The letters of the Jews are black and clean  
And lie in chain-line over Christian pages.  
The chosen letters bristle like barbed wire  
That hedge the flesh of man,  
Twisting and tightening the book that warns.  
These words, this burning bush, this flickering pyre  
Unsacrifices the bled son of man  
Yet plaits his crown of thorns.

Where go the tipsy idols of the Roman  
Past synagogues of patient time,  
Where go the sisters of the Gothic rose,  
Where go the blue eyes of the Polish women  
Past the almost natural crime,  
Past the still speaking embers of ghettos,  
There rise the tinder flowers of the Jews.  
The letters of the Jews are dancing knives  
That carve the heart of darkness seven ways.  
These are the letters that all men refuse  
And will refuse until the king arrives  
And will refuse until the death of time  
And all is rolled back in the book of days.

## *Israel*

When I think of the liberation of Palestine,  
When my eye conceives the great black English line  
Spanning the world news of two thousand years,  
My heart leaps forward like a hungry dog,  
My heart is thrown back on its tangled chain,  
My soul is hangdog in a Western chair.

When I think of the battle for Zion I hear  
The drop of chains, the starting forth of feet,  
And I remain chained in a Western chair.  
My blood beats like a bird against a wall,  
I feel the weight of prisons in my skull  
Falling away; my forebears stare through stone.

When I see the name of Israel high in print  
The fences crumble in my flesh; I sink  
Deep in a Western chair and rest my soul.  
I look the stranger clear to the blue depths  
Of his unclouded eye. I say my name  
Aloud for the first time unconsciously.

Speak of the tillage of a million heads  
No more. Speak of the evil myth no more  
Of one who harried Jesus on his way  
Saying, *Go faster*. Speak no more  
Of the yellow badge, *secta nefaria*.  
Speak the name only of the living land.

## *The Dirty Word*

The dirty word hops in the cage of the mind like the Pondicherry vulture, stomping with its heavy left claw on the sweet meat of the brain and tearing it with its vicious beak, ripping and chopping the flesh. Terrified, the small boy bears the big bird of the dirty word into the house, and grunting, puffing, carries it up the stairs to his own room in the skull. Bits of black feather cling to his clothes and his hair as he locks the staring creature in the dark closet.

All day the small boy returns to the closet to examine and feed the bird, to caress and kick the bird, that now snaps and flaps its wings savagely whenever the door is opened. How the boy trembles and delights at the sight of the white excrement of the bird! How the bird leaps and rushes against the walls of the skull, trying to escape from the zoo of the vocabulary! How wildly snaps the sweet meat of the brain in its rage.

And the bird outlives the man, being freed at the man's death-funeral by a word from the rabbi.

But I one morning went upstairs and opened the door and entered the closet and found in the cage of my mind the great bird dead. Softly I wept it and softly removed it and softly buried the body of the bird in the hollyhock garden of the house I lived in twenty years before. And out of the worn black feathers of the wing have I made pens to write these elegies, for I have outlived the bird, and I have murdered it in my early manhood.

## *The 151st Psalm*

Are You looking for us? We are here.  
Have You been gathering flowers, Elohim?  
We are Your flowers, we have always been.  
When will You leave us alone?  
We are in America.  
We have been here three hundred years.  
And what new altar will You deck us with?

Whom are You following, Pillar of Fire?  
What barn do You seek shelter in?  
At whose gate do You whimper  
In this great Palestine?  
Whose wages do You take in this New World?  
But Israel shall take what it shall take,  
Making us ready for Your hungry Hand!

Immigrant God, You follow me;  
You go with me, You are a distant tree;  
You are the beast that lows in my heart's gates;  
You are the dog that follows at my heel;  
You are the table on which I lean;  
You are the plate from which I eat.

Shepherd of the flocks of praise,  
Youth of all youth, ancient of days,  
Follow us.

## *The Olive Tree*

Save for a lusterless honing-stone of moon  
The sky stretches its flawless canopy  
Blue as the blue silk of the Jewish flag  
Over the valley and out to sea.  
It is bluest just above the olive tree.  
You cannot find in twisted Italy  
So straight a one; it stands not on a crag,  
Is not humpbacked with bearing in scored stone,  
But perfectly erect in my front yard,  
Oblivious of its fame. The fruit is hard,  
Multitudinous, acid, tight on the stem;  
The leaves ride boat-like in the brimming sun,  
Going nowhere and scooping up the light.  
It is the silver tree, the holy tree,  
Tree of all attributes.

### Now on the lawn

The olives fall by thousands, and I delight  
To shed my tennis shoes and walk on them,  
Pressing them coldly into the deep grass,  
In love and reverence for the total loss.

## *The Synagogue*

The synagogue dispirits the deep street,  
Shadows the face of the pedestrian,  
It is the adumbration of the Wall,  
The stone survival that laments itself,  
Our old entelechy of stubborn God,  
Our calendar that marks a separate race.

The swift cathedral palpitates the blood,  
The soul moves upward like a wing to meet  
The pinnacles of saints. There flocks of thanks  
In nooks of holy tracery arrive  
And rested take their message in mid-air  
Sphere after sphere into the papal heaven.

The altar of the Hebrews is a house,  
No relic but a place, Sinai itself,  
Not holy ground but factual holiness  
Wherein the living god is resident.  
Our scrolls are volumes of the thundered law  
Sabbath by Sabbath wound by hand to read.

He knows Al-Eloah to whom the Arab  
Barefooted falls on sands, on table roofs,  
In latticed alleys underneath the egg  
On wide mosaics, when the crier shrills.  
O profitable curse, most sacred rug,  
Your book is blindness and your sword is rust.

And Judenhetze is the course of time;  
We were rebellious, all but Abraham,  
And skulked like Jonah, angry at the gourd.  
Our days are captives in the minds of kings,  
We stand in tens disjointed on the world,  
Grieving the ribbon of a coast we hated.

Some choose the ethics of belief beyond  
Even particular election. Some  
In bland memorial churches modify  
The architecture of the state, and heaven  
Disfranchised watches, caput mortuum,  
The human substance eating, voting, smiling.

The Jew has no bedecked magnificat  
But sits in stricken ashes after death,  
Refusing grace; his grave is flowerless,  
He gutters in the tallow of his name.  
At Rome the multiplying tapers sing  
Life endless in the history of art.

And Zion womanless refuses grace  
To the first woman as to Magdalene,  
But half-remembers Judith or Rahab,  
The shrewd good heart of Esther honors still,  
And weeps for almost sacred Ruth, but doubts  
Either full harlotry or the faultless birth.

Our wine is wine, our bread is harvest bread  
That feeds the body and is not the body.  
Our blessing is to wine but not the blood  
Nor to sangreal the sacred dish. We bless  
The whiteness of the dish and bless the water  
And are not anthropophagous to him.

The immanent son then came as one of us  
And stood against the Ark. We have no prophets,  
Our scholars are afraid. There have been friars,  
Great healers, poets. The stars were terrible.  
At the Sadducee court he touched our panic;  
We were betrayed to sacrifice this man.

We live by virtue of philosophy,  
Past love, and have our devious reward.  
For faith he gave us land and took the land,  
Thinking us exiles of all humankind.  
Our name is yet the identity of God  
That storms the falling altar of the world.

## *The Phenomenon*

How lovely it was, after the official fright,  
To walk in the shadowy drifts, as if the clouds  
Saturated with the obscurity of night  
Had died and fallen piecemeal into shrouds.

What crepes there were, what sables heaped on stones,  
What soft shakos on posts, tragically gay!  
And oil-pool-flooded fields that blackly shone  
The more black under the liquid eye of day!

It was almost warmer to the touch than sands  
And sweeter-tasting than the white, and yet,  
Walking, the children held their fathers' hands  
Like visitors to a mine or parapet.

Then black it snowed again and while it fell  
You could see the sun, an irritated rim  
Wheeling through smoke; each from his shallow hell  
Experienced injured vision growing dim.

But one day all was clear, and one day soon,  
Sooner than those who witnessed it had died,  
Nature herself forgot the phenomenon,  
Her faulty snowfall brilliantly denied.

## *University*

To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew  
Is the curriculum. In mid-September  
The entering boys, identified by hats,  
Wander in a maze of mannered brick  
Where boxwood and magnolia brood  
And columns with imperious stance  
Like rows of ante-bellum girls  
Eye them, outlanders.

In whitened cells, on lawns equipped for peace,  
Under the arch, and lofty banister,  
Equals shake hands, unequals blankly pass;  
The exemplary weather whispers, "Quiet, quiet"  
And visitors on tiptoe leave  
For the raw North, the unfinished West,  
As the young, detecting an advantage,  
Practice a face.

Where, on their separate hill, the colleges,  
Like manor houses of an older law,  
Gaze down embankments on a land in fee,  
The Deans, dry spinsters over family plate,  
Ring out the English name like coin,  
Humor the snob and lure the lout.  
Within the precincts of this world  
Poise is a club.

But on the neighboring range, misty and high,  
The past is absolute: some luckless race  
Dull with inbreeding and conformity  
Wears out its heart, and comes barefoot and bad  
For charity or jail. The scholar  
Sanctions their obsolete disease;  
The gentleman revolts with shame  
At his ancestor.

And the true nobleman, once a democrat,  
Sleeps on his private mountain. He was one  
Whose thought was shapely and whose dream was broad;  
This school he held his art and epitaph.  
But now it takes from him his name,  
Falls open like a dishonest look,  
And shows us, rotted and endowed,  
Its senile pleasure.

## *Washington Cathedral*

From summer and the wheel-shaped city  
That sweats like a swamp and wrangles on  
Its melting streets, white mammoth Forums,  
And political hotels with awnings, caryatids;  
Past barricaded embassies with trees  
That shed trash and parch his eyes,  
To here, the acres of superior quiet,  
Shadow and damp, the tourist comes,  
And, cooled by stones and darkness, stares.

Tall as a lover's night, the nave  
Broods over him, irradiates,  
And stars of color out of painted glass  
Shoot downward on apostles and on chairs  
Huddled by hundreds under altar rails.  
Yet it is only Thursday; there are no prayers,

But exclamations. The lady invokes by name  
The thousand-odd small sculptures, spooks,  
New angels, pitted roods; she gives  
The inventory of relics to his heart  
That aches with history and astonishment:  
He gives a large coin to a wooden coffer.

Outside, noon blazes in his face like guns.  
He goes down by the Bishop's walk, the dial,  
    The expensive grass, the Byzantine bench,  
While stark behind him a red naked crane  
    Hangs over the unfinished transept,  
A Cubist hen rivaling the Gothic School.

Whether he sees the joke; whether he cares;  
Whether he tempts a vulgar miracle,  
Some deus ex machina, this is his choice,  
A shrine of whispers and tricky penumbras.  
Therefore he votes again for the paid  
Clergy, the English hint, the bones of Wilson  
Crushed under tons of fake magnificence.  
Nor from the zoo of his instincts  
Come better than crude eagles: now  
He cannot doubt that violent obelisk  
And Lincoln whittled to a fool's colossus.  
This church and city triumph in his eyes.  
He is only a good alien, nominally happy.

## *The Tingling Back*

Sometimes deeply immured in white-washed tower  
quiet at ink and thinking book,  
alone with my own smoke,  
the blood at rest, the body far below,  
swiftly there falls an angry shower  
of arrows upon my back,  
like bees or electric needles run amok  
between my flesh and shirt. I know  
then I have touched the pain  
of amour-propre, of something yesterday  
I said and I should not have said,  
I did and must not do.

These needles wing their insights from my brain  
and through and through my flesh they play  
to prick my skin with red  
letters of shame and blue blurs of tattoo.  
I sweat and take my medicine  
for one must be sincere  
and study one's sincerity like a crime:  
to be the very last to smile,  
the first one to begin  
(when danger streaks the atmosphere) to fear,  
to pocket praises like a dime,  
to pet the crocodile,  
to see a foreign agony as stone,  
to ravel dreams in crowded room,  
to let the hair grow tall,  
to skin the eye and thrust it to the wind.  
Yet if I stood with God alone  
inside the blinding tomb

I would not feel embarrassment at all  
nor those hot needles of the mind  
which are so clean. I'd ask  
not if I'd known the tissue of my will  
and scarified my body white,  
but whether, insincere,  
I'd grown to the simplicity of a mask;  
and if in natural error still  
whether my fingers might  
destroy the true and keep the error near.

## *Travelogue for Exiles*

Look and remember. Look upon this sky;  
Look deep and deep into the sea-clean air,  
The unconfined, the terminus of prayer.  
Speak now and speak into the hallowed dome.  
What do you hear? What does the sky reply?  
*The heavens are taken: this is not your home.*

Look and remember. Look upon this sea;  
Look down and down into the tireless tide.  
What of a life below, a life inside,  
A tomb, a cradle in the curly foam?  
The waves arise; sea-wind and sea agree  
*The waters are taken: this is not your home.*

Look and remember. Look upon this land,  
Far, far across the factories and the grass.  
Surely, there, surely, they will let you pass.  
Speak then and ask the forest and the loam.  
What do you hear? What does the land command?  
*The earth is taken: this is not your home.*

## *Lord, I Have Seen Too Much*

Lord, I have seen too much for one who sat  
In quiet at his window's luminous eye  
And puzzled over house and street and sky,  
Safe only in the narrowest habitat;  
Who studied peace as if the world were flat,  
The edge of nature linear and dry,  
But faltered at each brilliant entity  
Drawn like a prize from some magician's hat.

Too suddenly this lightning is disclosed:  
Lord, in a day the vacuum of Hell,  
The mouth of blood, the ocean's ragged jaw,  
More than embittered Adam ever saw  
When driven from Eden to the East to dwell,  
The lust of godhead hideously exposed!



PART 2.



## *Messias*

Alone in the darkling apartment the boy  
Was reading poetry when the doorbell rang;  
The sound sped to his ear and winged his joy,  
The book leaped from his lap on broken wing.

Down the gilt stairwell then he peered  
Where an old man of patriarchal race  
Climbed in an eastern language with his beard  
A black halo around his paper face.

His glasses spun with vision and his hat  
Was thick with fur in the August afternoon;  
His silk suit crackled heavily with light  
And in his hand a rattling canister shone.

Bigger he grew and softer the root words  
Of the hieratic language of his heart,  
And faced the boy, who flung the entrance wide  
And fled in terror from the nameless hurt.

Past every door like a dead thing he swam,  
Past the entablatures of the kitchen walls,  
Down the red ringing of the fire escape  
Singing with sun, to the green grass he came,

Sickeningly green, leaving the man to lurch  
Bewildered through the house and seat himself  
In the sacrificial kitchen after his march,  
To study the strange boxes on the shelf.

There mother found him mountainous and alone,  
Mumbling some singsong in a monotone,  
Crumbling breadcrumbs in his scholar's hand  
That wanted a donation for the Holy Land.

## *The Confirmation*

When mothers weep and fathers richly proud  
Worship on Sunday morning their tall son  
And girls in white like angels in a play  
    Tiptoe between the potted palms  
    And all the crimson windows pray,  
    The preacher bound in black  
Opens his hands like pages of a book  
    And holds the black and crimson law  
    For every boy to look.

Last night between the chapters of a dream,  
The photograph still sinning in the drawer,  
The boy awoke; the moon shone in the yard  
    On hairy hollyhocks erect  
    And buds of roses pink and hard  
    And on the solid wall  
A square of light like movies fell to pose  
    An actress naked in the night  
    As hollyhock and rose.

And to confirm his sex, breathless and white  
With benediction self-bestowed he knelt  
Oh tightly married to his childish grip,  
    And unction smooth as holy-oil  
    Fell from the vessel's level lip  
    Upon the altar-cloth;  
Like Easter boys the blood sang in his head  
    And all night long the tallow beads  
    Like tears dried in the bed.

Come from the church, you parents and you girls,  
And walk with kisses and with happy jokes  
Beside this man. Be doubly proud, you priest,  
    Once for his passion in the rose,  
    Once for his body self-released;  
        And speak aloud of her  
Who in the perfect consciousness of joy  
    Stood naked in the electric light  
        And woke the hidden boy.

## *The Jew at Christmas Eve*

I see the thin bell-ringer standing at corners  
Fine as a breath, in cloth of red,  
With eyes afar and long arm of a reed  
Weakly waving a religious bell,  
Under the boom of caroling hours  
I see the thin bell-ringer standing still,  
Breasting the prosperous tide on the Christmas pave.

I see the thin bell-ringer repeating himself  
From corner to corner, year to year,  
Struggling to stand beneath the windy blare  
Of horns that carol out of walls.  
He would attract a crying waif  
Or garrulous old woman down-at-heels  
Or a pair of lovers on the icy pave.

Whom do you summon, Santa of the spare?  
Whom do you summon, arm of a reed?  
Whom do you cheer with ringing and whom chide,  
And who stops at the tripod at your side  
And wishes you the time of year?  
A few who feed the cauldron of the unfed,  
The iron cauldron on the fireless pave.

I see the thin bell-ringer as a flame  
Of scarlet, trying to throw the flame  
With each sweep of the bell. The tide pours on  
And wets the ringer in cloth of red  
And parts around the ringer of flame  
With eyes afar and long arm of a reed  
Who shakes the fire on the snowy pave.

## *The First Time*

Behind shut doors, in shadowy quarantine,  
There shines the lamp of iodine and rose  
That stains all love with its medicinal bloom.  
This boy, who is no more than seventeen,  
Not knowing what to do, takes off his clothes  
As one might in a doctor's anteroom.

Then in a cross-draft of fear and shame  
Feels love hysterically burn away,  
A candle swimming down to nothingness  
Put out by its own wetted gusts of flame,  
And he stands smooth as uncarved ivory  
Heavily curved for some expert caress.

And finally sees the always open door  
That is invisible till the time has come,  
And half falls through as through a rotten wall  
To where chairs twist with dragons from the floor  
And the great bed drugged with its own perfume  
Spreads its carnivorous flower-mouth for all.

The girl is sitting with her back to him;  
She wears a black thing and she rakes her hair,  
Hauling her round face upward like moonrise;  
She is younger than he, her angled arms are slim  
And like a country girl her feet are bare.  
She watches him behind her with old eyes,

Transfixing him in space like some grotesque,  
Far, far from her where he is still alone  
And being here is more and more untrue.  
Then she turns round, as one turns at a desk,  
And looks at him, too naked and too soon,  
And almost gently asks: *Are you a Jew?*

## *Christmas Eve: Australia*

The wind blows hot. English and foreign birds  
And insects different as their fish excite  
The would-be calm. The usual flocks and herds  
Parade in permanent quiet out of sight,  
And there one crystal like a grain of light  
Sticks in the crucible of day and cools.  
A cloud burnt to a crisp at some great height  
Sips at the dark condensing in deep pools.

I smoke and read my Bible and chew gum,  
Thinking of Christ and Christmas of last year,  
And what those quizzical soldiers standing near  
Ask of the war and Christmases to come,  
And sick of causes and the tremendous blame  
Curse lightly and pronounce your serious name.

## *Sunday: New Guinea*

The bugle sounds the measured call to prayers,  
The band starts bravely with a clarion hymn,  
From every side, singly, in groups, in pairs,  
Each to his kind of service comes to worship Him.

Our faces washed, our hearts in the right place,  
We kneel or stand or listen from our tents;  
Half-naked natives with their kind of grace  
Move down the road with balanced staffs like mendicants.

And over the hill the guns bang like a door  
And planes repeat their mission in the heights.  
The jungle outmaneuvers creeping war  
And crawls within the circle of our sacred rites.

I long for our disheveled Sundays home,  
Breakfast, the comics, news of latest crimes,  
Talk without reference, and palindromes,  
Sleep and the Philharmonic and the ponderous *Times*.

I long for lounging in the afternoons  
Of clean intelligent warmth, my brother's mind,  
Books and thin plates and flowers and shining spoons,  
And your love's presence, snowy, beautiful, and kind.

## *The Leg*

Among the iodoform, in twilight-sleep,  
*What have I lost?* he first inquires,  
Peers in the middle distance where a pain,  
Ghost of a nurse, hazily moves, and day,  
Her blinding presence pressing in his eyes  
And now his ears. They are handling him  
With rubber hands. He wants to get up.

One day beside some flowers near his nose  
He will be thinking, *When will I look at it?*  
And pain, still in the middle distance, will reply,  
*At what?* and he will know it's gone,  
O where! and begin to tremble and cry.  
He will begin to cry as a child cries  
Whose puppy is mangled under a screaming wheel.

Later, as if deliberately, his fingers  
Begin to explore the stump. He learns a shape  
That is comfortable and tucked in like a sock.  
This has a sense of humor, this can despise  
The finest surgical limb, the dignity of limping,  
The nonsense of wheel chairs. Now he smiles to the wall:  
The amputation becomes an acquisition.

For the leg is wondering where he is (all is not lost)  
And surely he has a duty to the leg;  
He is its injury, the leg is his orphan,  
He must cultivate the mind of the leg,  
Pray for the part that is missing, pray for peace  
In the image of man, pray, pray for its safety,  
And after a little it will die quietly.

The body, what is it, Father, but a sign  
To love the force that grows us, to give back  
What in Thy palm is senselessness and mud?  
Knead, knead the substance of our understanding  
Which must be beautiful in flesh to walk,  
That if Thou take me angrily in hand  
And hurl me to the shark, I shall not die!

## *Five Self-Portraits*

I      I was born downtown on a wintry day  
          And under the roof where Poe expired;  
Tended by nuns my mother lay  
          Dark-haired and beautiful and tired.

Doctors and cousins paid their call,  
          The rabbi and my father helped.  
A crucifix burned on the wall  
          Of the bright room where I was whelped.

At one week all my family prayed,  
          Stuffed wine and cotton in my craw;  
The rabbi blessed me with a blade  
          According to the Mosaic Law.

The white steps blazed in Baltimore  
          And cannas and white statuary.  
I went home voluble and sore  
          Influenced by Abraham and Mary.

II      At one the Apocalypse had spoken,  
Von Moltke fell, I was housebroken.

At two how could I understand  
The murder of Archduke Ferdinand?

France was involved with history,  
I with my thumbs when I was three.

A sister came, we neared a war,  
Paris was shelled when I was four.

I joined in our peach-kernel drive  
For poison gas when I was five.

At six I cheered the big parade,  
Burned sparklers and drank lemonade.

At seven I passed at school though I  
Was far too young to say *Versailles*.

At eight the boom began to tire,  
I tried to set our house on fire.

The Bolsheviks had drawn the line,  
Lenin was stricken, I was nine.

—What evils do not retrograde  
To my first odious decade?

III      Saints by whose pages I would swear,  
          My Zarathustra, Edward Lear,  
          Ulysses, Werther, fierce Flaubert,  
          Where are my books of yesteryear?

Sixteen and sixty are a pair;  
We twice live by philosophies;  
My marginalia of the hair,  
Are you at one with Socrates?

Thirty subsides yet does not dare,  
Sixteen and sixty bang their fists.  
How is it that I no longer care  
For Kant and the Transcendentalists?

Public libraries lead to prayer,  
EN APXH ἡν δ λόγος—still  
Eliot and John are always there  
To tempt our admirari nil.

IV I lived in a house of panels,  
    Victorian, darkly made;  
A virgin in bronze and marble  
    Leered from the balustrade.

The street was a tomb of virtues,  
    Autumnal for dreams and haunts;  
I gazed from the polished windows  
    Toward a neighborhood of aunts.

Mornings I practiced piano,  
    Wrote elegies and sighed;  
The evenings were conversations  
    Of poetry and suicide.

Weltschmerz and mysticism,  
    What tortures we undergo!  
I loved with the love of Heinrich  
    And the poison of Edgar Poe.

V I plucked the bougainvillaea  
In Queensland in time of war;  
The train stopped at the station  
And I reached it from my door.

I have never kept a flower  
And this one I never shall  
I thought as I laid the blossom  
In the leaves of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

I read my book in the desert  
In the time of death and fear,  
The flower slipped from the pages  
And fell to my lap, my dear.

I sent it inside my letter,  
The purplest kiss I knew,  
And thus you abused my passion  
With “A most Victorian Jew.”

## *V-Letter*

I love you first because your face is fair,  
Because your eyes Jewish and blue,  
Set sweetly with the touch of foreignness  
Above the cheekbones, stare rather than dream.  
Often your countenance recalls a boy  
Blue-eyed and small, whose silent mischief  
Tortured his parents and compelled my hate  
To wish his ugly death.  
Because of this reminder, my soul's trouble,  
And for your face, so often beautiful,  
I love you, wish you life.

I love you first because you wait, because  
For your own sake, I cannot write  
Beyond these words. I love you for these words  
That sting and creep like insects and leave filth.  
I love you for the poverty you cry  
And I bend down with tears of steel  
That melt your hand like wax, not for this war  
The droplets shattering  
Those candle-glowing fingers of my joy,  
But for your name of agony, my love,  
That cakes my mouth with salt.

And all your imperfections and perfections  
And all your magnitude of grace  
And all this love explained and unexplained  
Is just a breath. I see you woman-size  
And this looms larger and more goddess-like  
Than silver goddesses on screens.  
I see you in the ugliness of light,

Yet you are beautiful,  
And in the dark of absence your full length  
Is such as meets my body to the full  
Though I am starved and huge.

You turn me from these days as from a scene  
Out of an open window far  
Where lies the foreign city and the war.  
You are my home and in your spacious love  
I dream to march as under flaring flags  
Until the door is gently shut.  
Give me the tearless lesson of your pride,  
Teach me to live and die  
As one deserving anonymity,  
The mere devotion of a house to keep  
A woman and a man.

Give me the free and poor inheritance  
Of our own kind, not furniture  
Of education, nor the prophet's pose,  
The general cause of words, the hero's stance,  
The ambitions incommensurable with flesh,  
But the drab makings of a room  
Where sometimes in the afternoon of thought  
The brief and blinding flash  
May light the enormous chambers of your will  
And show the gracious Parthenon that time  
Is ever measured by.

As groceries in a pantry gleam and smile  
Because they are important weights  
Bought with the metal minutes of your pay,  
So do these hours stand in solid rows,

The dowry for a use in common life.  
I love you first because your years  
Lead to my matter-of-fact and simple death  
Or to our open marriage,  
And I pray nothing for my safety back,  
Not even luck, because our love is whole  
Whether I live or fail.

## *The Ham-Bone of a Saint*

I     Much of transfiguration that we hear,  
The ballet of the atoms, the second law  
Of thermodynamics, Isis, and the queer

Fertilization of fish, the Catholic's awe  
For the life-cycle of the Nazarene,  
His wife whom sleeping Milton thought he saw;

Much of the resurrection that we've seen  
And taken part in, like the Passion Play,  
All of autumnal red and April green,

To those who walk in work from day to day,  
To economic and responsible man,  
All, all is substance. Life that lets him stay

Uses his substance kindly while she can  
But drops him lifeless after his one span.

II     What lives? the proper creatures in their homes?  
A weed? the white and giddy butterfly?  
Bacteria? necklaces of chromosomes?

What lives? the breathing bell of the clear sky?  
The crazed bull of the sea? Andean crags?  
Armies that plunge into themselves to die?

People? A sacred relic wrapped in rags,  
The ham-bone of a saint, the winter rose,  
Do these?—And is there not a hand that drags

The bottom of the universe for those  
Who still perhaps are breathing? Listen well,  
There lives a quiet like a cathedral close

At the soul's center where substance cannot dwell  
And life flowers like music from a bell.

III Writing, I crushed an insect with my nail  
And thought nothing at all. A bit of wing  
Caught my eye then, a gossamer so frail

And exquisite, I saw in it a thing  
That scorned the grossness of the thing I wrote.  
It hung upon my finger like a sting.

A leg I noticed next, fine as a mote,  
“And on this frail eyelash he walked,” I said,  
“And climbed and walked like any mountain goat.”

And in this mood I sought the little head,  
But it was lost; then in my heart a fear  
Cried out, “A life—why beautiful, why dead!”

It was a mite that held itself most dear,  
So small I could have drowned it with a tear.

## *Teasing the Nuns*

Up in the elevator went the nuns  
    Wild as a cage of undomestic ducks,  
Turning and twittering their unclipped hats,  
    Gay in captivity, a flirtatious flock  
Of waterfowl tipped with black  
    Above the traffic and its searing suns.  
Higher and higher in the wall we flew  
    Hauled on by rosaries and split strands of hair,  
Myself in the center sailing like Sinbad  
    Yanked into heaven by a hairy Roc;  
Whence we emerged into a towery cell  
    Where holy cross was splayed upon the wall  
In taxidermy of the eternal. They  
    Bedecked in elegant bird-names dropped  
Curtsies, I thought, and merrily sat  
    And fixed their gaze on mine that floated out  
Between them and their poised hawk.

“Sisters,” I said.—And then I stopped.

## *The Crucifix in the Filing Cabinet*

Out of the filing cabinet of true steel  
That saves from fire my rags of letters, bills,  
Manuscripts, contracts, all the trash of praise  
Which one acquires to prove and prove his days;

Out of the drawer that rolls on hidden wheels  
I drew a crucifix with beaded chain,  
Still new and frightened-looking and absurd.  
I picked it up as one picks up a bird

And placed it on my palm. It formed a pile  
Like a small mound of stones on which there stands  
A tree crazy with age, and on the tree  
Some ancient teacher hanging by his hands.

I found a velvet bag sewn by the Jews  
For holy shawls and frontlets and soft thongs  
That bind the arm at morning for great wrongs  
Done in a Pharaoh's time. The crucifix

I dropped down in the darkness of this pouch,  
Thought tangled with thought and chain with chain,  
Till time untie the dark with greedy look,  
Crumble the cross and bleed the leathery vein.

# PART 3.



## *My Grandmother*

My grandmother moves to my mind in context of sorrow  
And, as if apprehensive of near death, in black;  
Whether erect in chair, her dry and corded throat  
    harangued by grief,  
Or at ragged book bent in Hebrew prayer,  
Or gentle, submissive, and in tears to strangers;  
Whether in sunny parlor or back of drawn blinds.

Though time and tongue made any love disparate,  
On daguerreotype with classic perspective  
Beauty I sigh and soften at is hers.  
I pity her life of deaths, the agony of her own,  
But most that history moved her through  
Stranger lands and many houses,  
Taking her exile for granted, confusing  
The tongues and tasks of her children's children.

# Jew

The name is immortal but only the name, for the rest  
Is a nose that can change in the weathers of time or persist  
Or die out in confusion or model itself on the best.

But the name is a language itself that is whispered and hissed  
Through the houses of ages, and ever a language the same,  
And ever and ever a blow on our heart like a fist.

And this last of our dream in the desert, O curse of our name,  
Is immortal as Abraham's voice in our fragment of prayer  
Adonai, Adonai, for our bondage of murder and shame!

And the word for the murder of God will cry out on the air  
Though the race is no more and the temples are closed of our  
will  
And the peace is made fast on the earth and the earth is made  
fair;

Our name is impaled in the heart of the world on a hill  
Where we suffer to die by the hands of ourselves, and to kill.

## *The Southerner*

He entered with the authority of politeness  
And the jokes died in the air. A well-made blaze  
Grew round the main log in the fireplace  
Spontaneously. I watched its brightness  
Spread to the altered faces of my guests.  
They did not like the Southerner. I did.  
A liberal felt that someone should forbid  
That soft voice making its soft arrests.

As when a Negro or a prince extends  
His hand to an average man, and the mind  
Speeds up a minute and then drops behind,  
So did the conversation of my friends.  
I was amused by this respectful awe  
Which those hotly deny who have no prince.  
I watched the frown, the stare, and the wince  
Recede into attention, the arms thaw.

I saw my southern evil memories  
Raped from my mind before my eyes, my youth  
Practicing caste, perfecting the untruth  
Of staking honor on the wish to please.  
I saw my honor's paradox:  
Grandpa, the saintly Jew, keeping his beard  
In difficult Virginia, yet endeared  
Of blacks and farmers, although orthodox.

The nonsense of the gracious lawn,  
The fall of hollow columns in the pines,  
Do these deceive more than the rusted signs  
Of Jesus on the road? Can they go on  
In the timeless manner of all gentlefolk  
There in a culture rotted and unweeded  
Where the black yoni of the South is seeded  
By crooked men in denims thin as silk?

They do go on, denying still the fall  
Of Richmond and man, who gently live  
On the street above the violence, fugitive,  
Graceful, and darling, who recall  
The heartbroken country once about to flower,  
Full of black poison, beautiful to smell,  
Who know how to conform, how to compel,  
And how from the best bush to receive a flower.

## *The Murder of Moses*

By reason of despair we set forth behind you  
And followed the pillar of fire like a doubt,  
To hold to belief wanted a sign,  
Called the miracle of the staff and the plagues  
Natural phenomena.

We questioned the expediency of the march,  
Gossiped about you. What was escape  
To the fear of going forward and Pharaoh's wheels?  
When the chariots mired and the army flooded  
Our cry of horror was one with theirs.

You always went alone, a little ahead,  
Prophecy disturbed you, you were not a fanatic.  
The women said you were meek, the men  
Regarded you as a typical leader.  
You and your black wife might have been foreigners.

We even discussed your parentage; were you really a Jew?  
We remembered how Joseph had made himself a prince,  
All of us shared in the recognition  
Of his skill of management, sense of propriety,  
Devotion to his brothers and Israel.

We hated you daily. Our children died. The water spilled.  
It was as if you were trying to lose us one by one.  
Our wandering seemed the wandering of your mind,  
The cloud believed we were tireless,  
We expressed our contempt and our boredom openly.

At last you ascended the rock; at last returned.  
Your anger that day was probably His.  
When we saw you come down from the mountain, your skin alight  
And the stones of our law flashing,  
We fled like animals and the dancers scattered.

We watched where you overturned the calf on the fire,  
We hid when you broke the tablets on the rock,  
We wept when we drank the mixture of gold and water.  
We had hoped you were lost or had left us.  
This was the day of our greatest defilement.

You were simple of heart; you were sorry for Miriam,  
You reasoned with Aaron, who was your enemy.  
However often you cheered us with songs and prayers  
We cursed you again. The serpents bit us,  
And mouth to mouth you entreated the Lord for our sake.

At the end of it all we gave you the gift of death.  
Invasion and generalship were spared you.  
The hand of our direction, resignedly you fell,  
And while officers prepared for the river-crossing  
The One God blessed you and covered you with earth.

Though you were mortal and once committed murder  
You assumed the burden of the covenant,  
Spoke for the world and for our understanding.  
Converse with God made you a thinker,  
Taught us all early justice, made us a race.

## *Shylock*

*Ho, no, no, no, no, my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me, that he is sufficient.—THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

Home from the court he locked the door and sat  
In the evil darkness, suddenly composed.  
The knife shone dimly on the table and his eyes  
Like candles in an empty room  
Shone hard at nothing. Yet he appeared to smile.

Then he took up his talith and his hat  
And prayed mechanically and absently closed  
His fingers on the knife. If he could realize  
His actual defeat or personal doom  
He must die or change or show that he was vile.

Nevertheless he would remain and live,  
Submit to baptism, pay his fines,  
Appear in the Rialto as early as tomorrow,  
Not innocently but well aware  
That his revenge is an accomplished fact.

And poverty itself would help to give  
Humility to his old designs.  
His fallen reputation would help borrow  
A credit of new hate; for nothing will repair  
This open breach of nature, cruel and wracked.

His daughter lies with swine, and the old rat  
Tubal will be obsequious  
To buy off his disgrace and bargain on his shame.  
Despair can teach him nothing at all:  
Gold he hates more than he hates Jesus' crown.

The logic of Balthasar will fall flat  
On heaven's hearing. Incurious  
As to the future, totally clear of blame,  
He takes his ledgers out of the wall  
And lights them with a taper and sits down.

## *The Progress of Faust*

He was born in Deutschland, as you would suspect,  
And graduated in magic from Cracow  
In Fifteen Five. His portraits show a brow  
Heightened by science. The eye is indirect,  
As of bent light upon a crooked soul,  
And that he bargained with the Prince of Shame  
For pleasures intellectually foul  
Is known by every court that lists his name.

His frequent disappearances are put down  
To visits in the regions of the damned  
And to the periodic deaths he shammed,  
But, unregenerate and in Doctor's gown,  
He would turn up to lecture at the fair  
And do a minor miracle for a fee.  
Many a life he whispered up the stair  
To teach the black art of anatomy.

He was as deaf to angels as an oak  
When, in the fall of Fifteen Ninety-four,  
He went to London and crashed through the floor  
In mock damnation of the playgoing folk.  
Weekending with the scientific crowd,  
He met Sir Francis Bacon and helped draft  
“Colours of Good and Evil” and read aloud  
An obscene sermon at which no one laughed.

He toured the Continent for a hundred years  
And subsidized among the peasantry  
The puppet play, his tragic history;

With a white glove he boxed the Devil's ears  
And with a black his own. Tired of this,  
He published penny poems about his sins,  
In which he placed the heavy emphasis  
On the white glove which, for a penny, wins.

Some time before the hemorrhage of the Kings  
Of France, he turned respectable and taught;  
Quite suddenly everything that he had thought  
Seemed to grow scholars' beards and angels' wings.  
It was the Overthrow. On Reason's throne  
He sat with the fair Phrygian on his knees  
And called all universities his own,  
As plausible a figure as you please.

Then back to Germany as the sages' sage  
To preach comparative science to the young  
Who came from every land in a great throng  
And knew they heard the master of the age.  
When for a secret formula he paid  
The Devil another fragment of his soul,  
His scholars wept, and several even prayed  
That Satan would restore him to them whole.

Backwardly tolerant, Faustus was expelled  
From the Third Reich in Nineteen Thirty-nine.  
His exit caused the breaching of the Rhine,  
Except for which the frontier might have held.  
Five years unknown to enemy and friend  
He hid, appearing on the sixth to pose  
In an American desert at war's end  
Where, at his back, a dome of atoms rose.

## *Mongolian Idiot*

A dog that spoke, a monster born of sheep  
We mercilessly kill, and kill the thought,  
Yet house the parrot and let the centaur go,  
These being to their nature and those not.  
We laugh at apes, that never quite succeed  
At eating soup or wearing hats.

Adam had named so many but not this,  
This that would name a curse when it had come,  
Unfinished man, or witch, or myth, or sin,  
Not ever father and never quite a son.  
Ape had outstripped him, dog and darling lamb  
And all the kindergarten beasts.

Enter the bare room of his mind and count  
His store of words with letters large and black;  
See how he handles clumsily those blocks  
With swans and sums; his colored picture books.  
At thirty-five he squeals to see the ball  
Bounce in the air and roll away.

Pity and fear we give this innocent  
Who maimed his mother's beautiful instinct;  
But she would say, "My body had a dog;  
I bore the ape and nursed the crying sheep.  
He is my kindness and my splendid gift  
Come from all life and for all life."

## *The Convert*

Deep in the shadowy bethel of the tired mind,  
Where spooks and death lights ride, and Marys, too,  
Materialize like senseless ectoplasm  
Smiling in blue, out of the blue,  
Quite gradually, on a common afternoon,  
With no more inner fanfare than a sigh,  
With no cross in the air, drizzle of blood,  
Beauty of blinding voices from up high,  
The man surrenders reason to the ghost  
And enters church, via the vestry room.

The groan of positive science, hiss of friends,  
Substantiate what doctors call  
His rather shameful and benign disease,  
But ecumenical heaven clearly sees  
His love, his possibilities.  
O victory of the Unintelligence,  
What mystic rose developing from rock  
Is more a miracle than this overthrow?  
What Constitution ever promised more  
Than his declared insanity?

Yet he shall be less perfect than before,  
Being no longer neutral to the Book  
But answerable. What formerly were poems,  
Precepts, and commonplaces now are laws,  
Dantean atlases, and official news.  
The dust of ages settles on his mind  
And in his ears he hears the click of beads  
Adding, adding, adding like a prayer machine  
His heartfelt sums. Upon his new-found knees  
He treasures up the gold of never-ending day.

All arguments are vain—that Notre Dame  
Has plumbing, Baptists shoot their fellowmen,  
Hindus are pious, nuns have Cadillacs.

Apologetics anger him who is  
The living proof of what he newly knows;  
And proudly sorrowing for those who fail  
To read his simple *summa theologica*,  
He prays that in the burning they be spared,  
And prays for mercy as the south wind blows,  
And for all final sins that tip the scale.

Peace on a hundred thousand temples falls  
With gently even light, revealing some  
With wounded walls and missing faces, some  
Spared by the bombardier, and some by God.  
In mournful happiness the clerics move  
To put the altars back, and the new man,  
Heartbroken, walks among the broken saints,  
Thinking how heavy is the hand that hates,  
How light and secret is the sign of love  
In the hour of many significant conversions.

## *Adam and Eve*

### I. THE SICKNESS OF ADAM

In the beginning, at every step, he turned  
As if by instinct to the East to praise  
The nature of things. Now every path was learned  
He lost the lifted, almost flower-like gaze

Of a temple dancer. He began to walk  
Slowly, like one accustomed to be alone.  
He found himself lost in the field of talk;  
Thinking became a garden of its own.

In it were new things: words he had never said,  
Beasts he had never seen and knew were not  
In the true garden, terrors, and tears shed  
Under a tree by him, for some new thought.

And the first anger. Once he flung a staff  
At softly coupling sheep and struck the ram.  
It broke away. And God heard Adam laugh  
And for his laughter made the creature lame.

And wanderlust. He stood upon the Wall  
To search the unfinished countries lying wide  
And waste, where not a living thing could crawl,  
And yet he would descend, as if to hide.

His thought drew down the guardian at the gate,  
To whom man said, "What danger am I in?"  
And the angel, hurt in spirit, seemed to hate  
The wingless thing that worried after sin,

For it said nothing but marvelously unfurled  
Its wings and arched them shimmering overhead,  
Which must have been the signal from the world  
That the first season of our life was dead.

Adam fell down with labor in his bones,  
And God approached him in the cool of day  
And said, "This sickness in your skeleton  
Is longing. I will remove it from your clay."

He said also, "I made you strike the sheep."  
It began to rain and God sat down beside  
The sinking man. When he was fast asleep  
He wet his right hand deep in Adam's side

And drew the graceful rib out of his breast.  
Far off, the latent streams began to flow  
And birds flew out of Paradise to nest  
On earth. Sadly the angel watched them go.

## II. THE RECOGNITION OF EVE

Whatever it was she had so fiercely fought  
Had fled back to the sky, but still she lay  
With arms outspread, awaiting its assault,  
Staring up through the branches of the tree,

The fig tree. Then she drew a shuddering breath  
And turned her head instinctively his way.  
She had fought birth as dying men fight death.

Her sigh awakened him. He turned and saw  
A body swollen, as though formed of fruits,  
White as the flesh of fishes, soft and raw.  
He hoped she was another of the brutes,  
So he crawled over and looked into her eyes,  
The human wells that pool all absolutes.  
It was like looking into double skies.

And when she spoke the first word (it was *thou*)  
He was terror-stricken, but she raised her hand  
And touched his wound where it was fading now,  
For he must feel the place to understand.  
Then he recalled the longing that had torn  
His side, and while he watched it whitely mend,  
He felt it stab him suddenly like a thorn.

He thought the woman had hurt him. Was it she  
Or the same sickness seeking to return;  
Or was there any difference, the pain set free  
And she who seized him now as hard as iron?  
Her fingers bit his body. She looked old  
And involuted, like the newly born.  
He let her hurt him till she loosed her hold.

Then she forgot him and she wearily stood  
And went in search of water through the grove.  
Adam could see her wandering through the wood,  
Studying her footsteps as her body wove  
In light and out of light. She found a pool

And there he followed shyly to observe.  
She was already turning beautiful.

### III. THE KISS

The first kiss was with stumbling fingertips.  
Their bodies grazed each other as if by chance  
And touched and untouched in a kind of dance.  
Second, they found out touching with their lips.

Some obscure angel, pausing on his course,  
Shed such a brightness on the face of Eve  
That Adam in grief was ready to believe  
He had lost her love. The third kiss was by force.

Their lips formed foreign, unimagined oaths  
When speaking of the Tree of Guilt. So wide  
Their mouths, they drank each other from inside.  
A gland of honey burst within their throats.

But something rustling hideously overhead,  
They jumped up from the fourth caress and hid.

### IV. THE TREE OF GUILT

Why, on her way to the oracle of Love,  
Did she not even glance up at the Tree  
Of Life, that giant with the whitish cast  
And glinting leaves and berries of dull gray,

As though covered with mold? But who would taste  
The medicine of immortality,  
And who would "be as God"? And in what way?

So she came breathless to the lowlier one  
And like a priestess of the cult she knelt,  
Holding her breasts in token for a sign,  
And prayed the spirit of the burdened bough  
That the great power of the tree be seen  
And lift itself out of the Tree of Guilt  
Where it had hidden in the leaves till now.

Or did she know already? Had the peacock  
Rattling its quills, glancing its thousand eyes  
At her, the iridescence of the dove,  
Stench of the he-goat, everything that joins  
Told her the mystery? It was not enough,  
So from the tree the snake began to rise  
And dropt its head and pointed at her loins.

She fell and hid her face and still she saw  
The spirit of the tree emerge and slip  
Into the open sky until it stood  
Straight as a standing-stone, and spilled its seed.  
And all the seed were serpents of the good.  
Again he seized the snake and from its lip  
It spat the venomous evil of the deed.

And it was over. But the woman lay  
Stricken with what she knew, ripe in her thought  
Like a fresh apple fallen from the limb  
And rotten, like a fruit that lies too long.  
This way she rose, ripe-rotten in her prime

And spurned the cold thing coiled against her foot  
And called her husband, in a kind of song.

## V. THE CONFESSION

As on the first day her first word was *thou*.  
He waited while she said, "Thou art the tree."  
And while she said, almost accusingly,  
Looking at nothing, "Thou art the fruit I took."  
She seemed smaller by inches as she spoke,  
And Adam wondering touched her hair and shook,  
Half understanding. He answered softly, "How?"

And for the third time, in the third way, Eve:  
"The tree that rises from the middle part  
Of the garden." And almost tenderly, "Thou art  
The garden. *We*." Then she was overcome,  
And Adam coldly, lest he should succumb  
To pity, standing at the edge of doom,  
Comforted her like one about to leave.

She sensed departure and she stood aside  
Smiling and bitter. But he asked again,  
"How did you eat? With what thing did you sin?"  
And Eve with body slackened and uncouth,  
"Under the tree I took the fruit of truth  
From an angel. I ate it with my other mouth."  
And saying so, she did not know she lied.

It was the man who suddenly released  
From doubt, wept in the woman's heavy arms,  
Those double serpents, subtly winding forms  
That climb and drop about the manly boughs;  
And dry with weeping, fiery and aroused,  
Fell on her face to slake his terrible thirst  
And bore her body earthward like a beast.

## VI. SHAME

The hard blood falls back in the manly fount,  
The soft door closes under Venus' mount,  
The ovoid moon moves to the Garden's side  
And dawn comes, but the lovers have not died.  
They have not died but they have fallen apart  
In sleep, like equal halves of the same heart.

How to teach shame? How to teach nakedness  
To the already naked? How to express  
Nudity? How to open innocent eyes  
And separate the innocent from the wise?  
And how to re-establish the guilty tree  
In infinite gardens of humanity?

By marring the image, by the black device  
Of the goat-god, by the clown of Paradise,  
By fruits of cloth and by the navel's bud,  
By itching tendrils and by strings of blood,  
By ugliness, by the shadow of our fear,  
By ridicule, by the fig-leaf patch of hair.

Whiter than tombs, whiter than whitest clay,  
Exposed beneath the whitening eye of day,  
They awoke and saw the covering that reveals.  
They thought they were changing into animals.  
Like animals they bellowed terrible cries  
And clutched each other, hiding each other's eyes.

## VII. EXILE

The one who gave the warning with his wings,  
Still doubting them, held out the sword of flame

Against the Tree of Whiteness as they came  
Angrily, slowly by, like exiled kings,

And watched them at the broken-open gate  
Stare in the distance long and overlong,  
And then, like peasants, pitiful and strong,  
Take the first step toward earth and hesitate.

For Adam raised his head and called aloud,  
“My Father, who has made the garden pall,  
Giving me all things and then taking all,  
Who with your opposite nature has endowed

Woman, give us your hand for our descent.  
Needing us greatly, even in our disgrace,  
Guide us, for gladly do we leave this place  
For our own land and wished-for banishment.”

But woman prayed, “Guide us to Paradise.”  
Around them slunk the uneasy animals,  
Strangely excited, uttering coughs and growls,  
And bounded down into the wild abyss.

And overhead the last migrating birds,  
Then empty sky. And when the two had gone  
A slow half-dozen steps across the stone,  
The angel came and stood among the shards

And called them, as though joyously, by name.  
They turned in dark amazement and beheld  
Eden ablaze with fires of red and gold,  
The garden dressed for dying in cold flame,

And it was autumn, and the present world.

# Notes

A few of the poems may require a word of explanation, either because of some obscurity in the text or because of a seeming irrelevancy to the collection as a whole. I hope, of course, that no one will need the notes.

## *Israel, p. 4*

This poem was commissioned to be read at a celebration of the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. It was performed at a mass meeting in Baltimore in that year.

## *The 151st Psalm, p. 6*

Commissioned to be performed for the celebration of the three-hundredth anniversary of the landing of the Jews in America.

## *The Synagogue, p. 8*

The word "philosophy" here has the meaning of "stoical" in the vulgar sense. The image is that of the shrug.

## *The Phenomenon, p. 11*

The poem refers to the world of the Nazis. Black has long been the official, as well as the symbolic color for Germany. The first black snowfall indicates the triumph of Hitler; the second the destruction of Germany. The closing quatrain is intended as a warning against the forgetfulness of history.

## *The Leg, p. 32*

Freud speaks (it may be all too often) of "violent defloration" and "the fear of being eaten by the Father." In Freud's view, as in that of every Jew, mutilation, circumcision, and "the fear of being eaten" are all one. *The Leg* is a poem written during war and its subject is the wholeness even of the mutilated. The poem *Mongolian Idiot* has the same theme.

*V-Letter*, p. 39

The title refers to a photostat miniature letter used by the U. S. Army.

*Teasing the Nuns*, p. 45

The setting of the poem is a skyscraper of Loyola University in Chicago, where I taught a class in writing for several years. The theme of the poem is the essential inability of the Jew to speak to the nuns.

*The Murder of Moses*, p. 53

Based on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. It is in this work that Freud says, "The unmentionable crime was replaced by the tenet of the somewhat shadowy conception of original sin." My poem originally was called *Moses*, and the reference to the "murder" was muted. See also the sonnet *Jew*.

*Shylock*, p. 55

Attempts to brighten the character of Shylock by certain scholars and apologists seem to me absurd. Shylock represents not greed but hatred. As such he is a legitimate Shakespearean Jew, a mystery even to Shakespeare.

*Mongolian Idiot*, p. 59

Among Jews he is accepted as a member of the household and is not shunned. In my childhood I was acquainted with a dozen of these unfortunates. One does not see them any more.

*Adam and Eve*, p. 62

These poems were originally printed under the title *Eden Retold*. The poems in this series are not symbolic but literal interpretations. That is, I wrote them according to my own interpretation of the lines in Genesis, where they are first presented. Rilke says that Adam was *determined* to leave the Garden. My argument in the poem is that God determined him to leave it. Much of the imagery of the poems is drawn from the *Zohar* or central work of the cabala, some from the renegade Freudian, Wilhelm Reich. The viewpoint of the sequence, that man is for the world, not for the afterworld, is Jewish.





## A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

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KARL SHAPIRO was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 10, 1913, and attended the University of Virginia and Johns Hopkins University. When his first book, *Person, Place and Thing*, was published in 1942, Mr. Shapiro was already with the army in the South Pacific, where he remained until the spring of 1945. In 1946 he was appointed Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, and then, in 1947, he joined the faculty of Johns Hopkins University, where he taught writing courses until he resigned in 1950 to become editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Mr. Shapiro is now Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, and is editor of *The Schooner*.

Mr. Shapiro's poems, essays and reviews have appeared in leading literary magazines all over the world. His second volume of verse, *V-Letter and Other Poems*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1945.

